

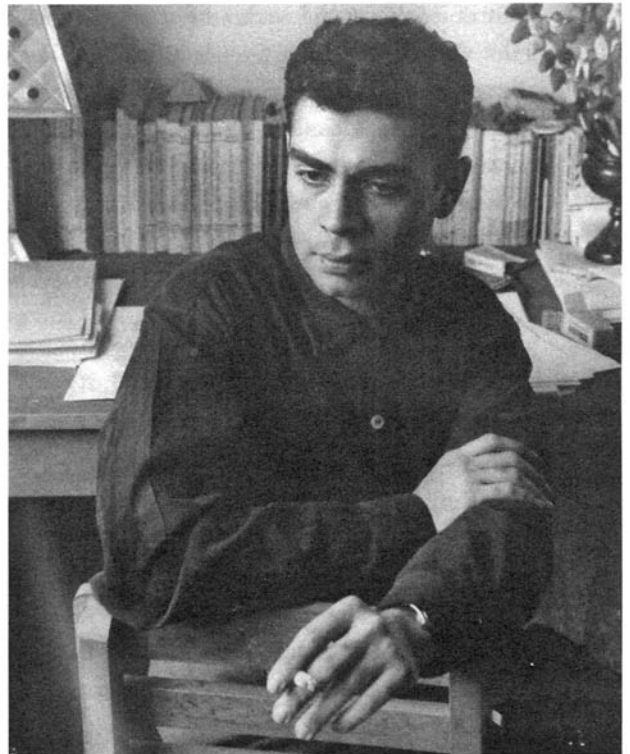
Hugo Argüelles

The Magical Feeling of Life

Gonzalo Valdés Medellín*

To say that Hugo Argüelles' playwriting is one of the most up-to-date, varied, pro-active and authentic bodies of work that the twentieth-century Mexican theater has produced—even if it sounds reiterative or commonplace—is one of the great and just truths that have been said of one of our most prolific contemporary dramatists. To achieve a sincere, analytical focus for Argüelles's work, we must stick to the precept that I simplify here: By his pen and talent, Hugo Argüelles won an autonomous, irrevocable place next to other Mexican dramatists who have honored our country with universal resonance (Rodolfo Usigli, Sergio Magaña, Elena Garro, Jorge Ibarguengoitia, Federico S. Inclán, Emilio Carballido, Héctor Azar and Luis G. Basurto; or, in his generation, Vicente Leñero, Antonio González Caballero, Willebaldo López and Felipe Santander, primarily). As chronological precursors in the history of the Mexican theater, they explain the appearance of a playwright who is irreverent, iconoclastic and audacious in unfolding his passion for tracing experimental languages and their aesthetic confluences and verifications: Hugo Argüelles (born in Veracruz, 1932; died in Mexico City, 2003).

In the late 1950s, the young playwright already had a solid body of work with its own dimensions, totally authentic and diverse, practically unprecedented and unexplored on the national stage, that began a new period in our country's theater.



An enlightened writer and sharp thinker, Argüelles absolutely fulfilled his creative life project. He resolutely entered the—fortunately—undefeated terrain of the dramatic arts from his first *Trilogía rural* (Rural Trilogy): *Los prodigiosos* (1957) (The Prodigious), *Los cuervos están de luto* (The Crows Are in Mourning) (1958) and *El tejedor de milagros* (The Weaver of Miracles) (1960), all three masterpieces, examples of stylistic perfection, discursive maturity and categorical command of the form that, in this case becomes that of a virtuoso, constituting a series of guarantees and attributes that took no time at all for the public to assimilate

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as genius. And, in effect, to speak of the genius of Argüelles' theater is no exaggeration. There is no reason to be afraid of words. There is genius in this playwright if by genius we understand he who shows an unlimited intellectual and artistic aptitude for creating, discovering and inventing. Argüelles created unparalleled work in the Mexican theater discovering with an acid sense of humor and loving, idiosyncratic inquiry, the magic of the popular soul in the Mexicans of today. Always close to his ancestral roots, Argüelles invented an ironic and sagacious way of looking at the world: the reverse of magic. The skin of reflection. Criticism, which Octavio Paz saw as simple, straightforward and substantially like a "vision and divination." For Argüelles, divination is humor and his vision, blackness, a combination that reveals his particular style: black

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humor that "was already there," as Rodolfo Usigli said, "but Argüelles had to arrive to find its essence,"—as Luis Buñuel confirmed it— from the most vital platform, Mexican identity. However, Argüelles, the Lord of Black Humor (as he would often be called until his death), will always be beyond labels, even the academic, stiff confines of this or that theatrical genre, since breaks and anti-conventionalism were essential parts of his work.

And for this reason, Argüelles became a master of genres and styles. His comedies with intense tragic strands, the main example of which is *Los cuervos están de luto*, show this, as do his farces, *Los prodigiosos*, *El tejedor de milagros* and *La ronda de la hechizada* (The Round of the Bewitched) (1967), in which magic gives it the farcical tone and "the inexplicable" verifies day-to-day reality. Rhetoric? No. Paradox. Life is just that: an un-

avoidable paradox, as Denis Diderot pointed out in his celebrated treatise on comedy, *The Paradox of the Comedian*.

Reviewing Argüelles's vast repertory we can easily say that he dissected (in a zoological analogy for his universe, confronted and compared to that of men) time and time again the essence of Mexicans from different perspectives, but always betting on authenticity, transgressing truth, apprehending it. He bet on that and he won. Here is precisely one of this playwright's fundamental merits: his creations not only underline his truth as a human being and a creator, but a collective truth, latent and manifested in all Mexicans, in their historic journey and cosmic reaffirmations.

After almost 50 years of authorship, Argüelles wrote up until the very end; the day before he died, in a hospital bed, he continued to write one last farce, *Romance en el Mictlán* (Romance in Mictlán), part of his now posthumous work *Concierto para guillotina y 30 cabezas* (Concert for Guillotine and 30 Heads). Hugo Argüelles's work is an example of youth, vitality, transgression, criticism and a love of the evolution of the dramatic arts. That is his legacy as one of the most radical and combative authors of the Mexican theater of the second half of the twentieth century.

Argüelles taught by example and with an unbreakable capacity for struggle. He was a guide. He leaves behind the consciousness of being Mexican in our theater, beyond fashion and fatuously foreign-worshiping inclinations. If we can even speak of the Mexican theater it is thanks to Argüelles's profound ideological attitude in favor of it. That is why he was so popular; that is why he was so successful. Aside from the works already mentioned, among his important pieces are *El ritual de la salamandra* (The Ritual of the Salamander) (1981), a biting critique of domesticating, castrating Catholicism; *Los huesos del amor y de la muerte* (The Bones of Love and Death), produced by the author of this article in 1997 in the National Autonomous University of Mexico and published in the UNAM's *La Cabra* cultural series. It is his most personal piece, evidencing his poetic abilities with loving veracity and beautiful language

and an incisive anti-historical vision of Agustín de Iturbide's empire in Mexico. Another central work is *Escarabajos* (Dung Beetles) (1991), perhaps foreshadowed in Argüelles' first work, originally written in the 1960s, published in the magazine of the National Fine Arts Institute Theater School magazine under the title *La casa solariega* (The Ancestral Home). This symphonic poem destroys the institution of the family with iconoclastic vehemence, at the same time chronicling Mexican theater of the 1960s and 1970s in the monologues of Jaime, the protagonist, an actor preparing to do *Medea*, who, spreading his mother's ashes on his face, relives his life. In her book *Entretelones* (Behind the Scenes), critic Rosa Margot Ochoa writes, "Argüelles's treatment of this obsessive character is admirable, as he makes it jibe perfectly with the figure of the Greek wizard.... This work, *Escarabajos* (named after the insects that accumulate such an enormous quantity of filth that they are immersed in it) is without a doubt one of the best by Argüelles." This situates us in one of the fundamental issues of Argüelles's theater: the decline of the family, dealt with in *Los amores criminales de las vampiras Morales* (The Criminal Loves of the Morales She-Vampires) (1983); *La tarántula art nouveau de la Calle del Oro* (The Art Nouveau Tarantula of Gold Street) (1994); *El cerco de la cabra dorada* (The Fence of the Golden Goat) (1994); *La esfinge de las maravillas* (The Sphinx of Wonders) (1995); or *Fábula de la mantarraya quinceañera* (Fable of the Fifteen-year-old Manta Ray). All these works emphasize Mexican women's character and the bold exercise of their sexuality.

In this brief account, it is impossible not to mention *El cocodrilo solitario del panteón rococó* (The Lonely Crocodile of the Rococo Graveyard) (1982); *Los caracoles amorosos del burdel del cementerio* (The Loving Snails of the Cemetery Whorehouse) (1988); *Águila Real* (Golden Eagle) (1992); *Los coyotes secretos de Coyoacán* (The Secret Coyotes of Coyoacán) (1999); the expressive, lyrical beauty of *Alfa del Alba* (Alpha of the Dawn) (1993); the hilarious expertise of his *Concierto para guillotina y 40 cabezas* (Concert for Guillotine and 40 Heads), the predecessor of his

posthumous work, originally produced in the 1990s by Francisco Peredo; or his impressive, moving vision of the Nazi Holocaust in *La noche de las aves cabalísticas* (The Night of the Cabalistic Birds) (1993).

Other important works are *Doña Macabra* (Madame Macabre), *La dama de la luna roja* (The Lady of the Red Moon), *Valerio Rostro, traficante en sombras* (Valerio Rostro, Dealer in Shadows), *El gran inquisidor* (The Great Inquisitor), *Las hienas se mueren de risa* (The Hyenas Are Dying of Laughter), *El retablo del gran relajo* (The Big Hubbub Tableau), *La boda negra de las alacranas* (The She-Scorpions' Black Wedding), *El vals de los buitres bicéfalos* (The Waltz of the Two-Headed Vultures). And, his final project which he never finished: the rewrite of *La primavera de los escorpiones* (The Spring of the Scorpions), one of his screenplays that was a resounding box-office success in the 1970s.

Space is getting short. Much should be said of a man, a tremendously alive, human writer like Hugo Argüelles. Fortunately, his work has been published in more than 20 volumes, at everyone's disposal, and in the UNAM series of recordings read by famous actors, *Voz viva de México* (Mexico, A Living Voice).

There are many videotapes of his productions; we have his work as a script writer, including *Las pirañas aman en cuaremas* (Piranhas Love During Lent), *La primavera de los escorpiones* (The Spring of the Scorpions), *Las cenizas del diputado* (The Deputy's Ashes) and *Los amantes fríos* (The Cold Lovers); we have his adaptations for the screen of *Los cuervos están de luto* (The Crows Are in Mourning), *El tejedor de milagros* (The Weaver of Miracles) and *Doña Macabra* (Madame Macabre); and the books about his work and thought. And we have the main thing: the testimony of those of us who can corroborate the enormous humanity, the great sensitivity and spirituality that he had, and his unceasing generosity. Hugo Argüelles reveals the magic feeling of life to us through his work, his thought and his example. His work, an avalanche of enjoyment and reflection, will endure. ■■■